

notwithstanding, the more prosaic story in Judges 19 served as the model for the mythical narrative in Genesis 19, where Lot's angelic visitors are miraculously saved from homosexual assault. The whole account, reinforced by the enduring geographical features of the Dead Sea region (the supposed "statue of Lot's wife"), underlay the theological dogma that the destruction of the Cities of the Plain had been divine retribution for the homosexual depravity of the former inhabitants. And so the "sin of Sodom" became synonymous with homosexual activity and then with "unnatural vice"—a Hellenic, not a Judaic concept—in general, and the scriptural fate of the cities and prophecies of future doom made their barren site linger as an eternal warning to any people that tolerated such depravity in its midst.

The notion of *sodomy* is an innovation of Latin Christianity toward the end of the twelfth century; it is not found in Jewish or **Byzantine** writings. Legal usage in various countries has given the word broader or narrower definitions, particularly in regard to the character of the actions that "constitute the offense." In the late **Middle Ages** the tendency of the allegorizing mind to parallelism led to the notion that Gomorrah, the twin city of Sodom, had been a hotbed of lesbianism, even though there was nothing in either Testament that would suggest such a construction. The hold of the legend on the mind of Christian Europe has been such that even in the twentieth century literary works have been composed on the subject, and the less sophisticated part of the population still believes that the destruction of Sodom exemplified the wrath of God that is revealed from heaven (Romans 1:18) against those who practice homosexuality.

Warren Johansson

### SODOMA (GIOVANNI ANTONIO BAZZI, CALLED "IL SODOMA"; 1477–1549)

Italian painter. Born at Vercelli, Sodoma studied under a minor Lombard artist (Martino Spanzotti) in Milan, where he sustained a more crucial influence—that of the innovative work of **Leonardo da Vinci**. Between 1505 and 1508 he executed a series of frescoes in the Benedictine monastery of Monte Oliveto near Siena. He then became Siena's leading artist. He was also summoned to Rome, where he painted part of a ceiling in the Vatican's Stanza della Segnatura, as well as some handsome frescoes in the Villa Farnesina. Today his works are less appreciated than those of his Sienese rival, Domenico Beccafumi.

Despite some nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars who have sought to deny it, his nickname is deserved. According to his biographer Giorgio Vasari, Sodoma loved unchaste entertainments and merrymaking; he surrounded himself with an entourage of boys and beardless youths. Cherishing them greatly, "he acquired the name of Sodoma, which he did not take with annoyance or disdain, but rather gloried in it, making jingles and verses on the subject, which he pleasantly sang to the accompaniment of the lute." Once, while in Florence, his horse won a race, and on being asked what name should be proclaimed, he insisted "Sodoma, Sodoma!" This effrontery earned him a session of fagbashing by the mob. He was moreover an eccentric, keeping a menagerie of animals so that "his house resembled Noah's Ark" (Vasari). In his early years at Siena he did marry, siring a daughter, but his wife left him in disgust after a year. In a tax return of 1531 Sodoma facetiously claimed to have three mistresses and thirty grown children—an assertion that is no more indicative of basic heterosexuality than was Walt Whitman's comparable declaration three and a half centuries later.

Vasari, who furnishes most of the information on Sodoma's personal life, taxes him not with immorality, but with lack of industry and imprudent management, as a result of which he passed his last years in want.

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Wayne R. Dynes

## SODOMY

As an overarching term for sexual deviation, the word sodomy today has an archaic, somewhat obsolescent ring, though it still figures in some legal discourse ("the sodomy laws"). Sodomite, having shrunk to one syllable in early modern British slang ("sod"), has faded further, so that it is little more than a jocular term of mild abuse. Historically, however, the concept of sodomy has been of immense importance. Moreover, it had several nuances of meaning, which it is essential to distinguish in order to interpret older written evidence.

The term *sodomia* originated in Medieval Latin about the year 1180 as a designation for the "crime against nature" that could be committed in one of three ways: (1) *ratione modi*, by obtaining venereal pleasure with a member of the opposite sex, but in the wrong manner, e.g., by fellation; (2) *ratione sexus*, with an individual having the genitalia of the same sex; or (3) *ratione generis*, with a brute animal. The abstract noun *sodomia* (for the sin) derives from the noun of agent *sodomita* (for the sinner), which had originally been used in the Septuagint and Vulgate to mean an inhabitant of the city of Sodom (from Old North Arabic *sudummatu* = the [Dead] Sea). According to Genesis 19, Sodom had been destroyed because of the sexual depravity of its male

population, which had attempted a gang rape on the two angels who came to deliver Lot and his family from the impending destruction. In time the expressions *peccatum sodomitae* or *crimen sodomitae* came to be used to designate a variety of "unnatural" sexual acts, but only in Latin. Christianity did the new derivative *sodomia* take hold and become a theological and legal concept; it remained alien to Byzantine Greek and Medieval Hebrew. From Latin the term passed into the modern languages of Western and Central Europe as the technical expression for the crime which was punishable by death everywhere until the second half of the eighteenth century, when the Enlightenment began to attack this sacril offense as a relic of the medieval superstition that divine retribution would overtake any community that tolerated "sodomy" in its midst.

The terms sodomy and sodomite thus spread until they embraced a far larger semantic sphere and a higher pitch of affectivity than the later terms (sexual) **inversion** and **homosexuality**, and in reading a medieval or later legal text one must not immediately assume that homosexual behavior is meant thereby. Most prosecutions, it is true, were for either male homosexuality or bestiality; criminal proceedings against lesbians and heterosexuals guilty of fellation or anal intercourse were rare at all times, though an occasional case figures in the (admittedly fragmentary) reports from the pre-modern era. The legal definition of the term—what constituted an "indictable offense"—has also differed from country to country and from century to century down to our own time. Eighteenth-century Poland even recorded an instance in which sexual intercourse between a male serf and a girl of noble birth was punished as "sodomy"—because it had supposedly resulted in a crop failure on the estate where it occurred. As a practical definition one may say that a "sodomite" was one whose aberrant sexual activity had become known to the Christian community and